Page-Turner

Criticism, contention, and conversation about books that matter.

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May 24, 2012

Coming Soon: Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box”

Posted by The New Yorker
This evening, the New Yorker Fiction Department (@NYerFiction) will start tweeting Jennifer Egan’s new story “Black Box,”
which will appear in its entirety in the Science Fiction Issue, out on Monday. We asked Egan what inspired her to structure her
story in paragraphs of a hundred and forty characters or fewer.

Several of my long-standing fictional interests converged in the writing of “Black Box.” One involves fiction that takes the
form of lists; stories that appear to be told inadvertently, using a narrator’s notes to him or herself. My working title for this
story was “Lessons Learned,” and my hope was to tell a story whose shape would emerge from the lessons the narrator derived
from each step in the action, rather than from descriptions of the action itself. Another long-term goal of mine has been to take a
character from a naturalistic story and travel with her into a different genre. Jon Scieszka first put this idea into my head with
his spectacular meta-fictional picture book, “The True Story of the Three Little Pigs!,” in which the three pigs move through
picture books drawn in radically different styles, transforming visually into the style of each world they enter. I wondered
whether I could do something analogous with a character from my novel “A Visit From the Goon Squad”: create a cartoon
version of that person, for example—or, in this case, a spy-thriller version. I’d also been wondering about how to write fiction
whose structure would lend itself to serialization on Twitter. This is not a new idea, of course, but it’s a rich one—because of
the intimacy of reaching people through their phones, and because of the odd poetry that can happen in a hundred and forty
characters. I found myself imagining a series of terse mental dispatches from a female spy of the future, working undercover by
the Mediterranean Sea. I wrote these bulletins by hand in a Japanese notebook that had eight rectangles on each page. The story
was originally nearly twice its present length; it took me a year, on and off, to control and calibrate the material into what is
now “Black Box.”

Follow @NYerFiction for “Black Box,” which will appear in ten nightly installments, from 8 to 9 P.M. E.T. If you miss it on
Twitter, you’ll find each day’s installment collated here on Page-Turner.

Notebook page courtesy Jennifer Egan.

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Welcome to the world of the microblogging novel! My own Twitter novel, Executive Severance, was posted over 15 months between 2009 and 2010 and has been brought out in book form by NeoPoiesis Press http://bit.ly/vbr27O. Here is my companion blog to Executive Severance, Whale Fire: http://www.executiveseverance.blogspot.com/ where I soon will begin a running commentary on the sources of my Twitter novel.

**Posted 5/24/2012, 5:14:49pm by rblechman**

@Juanignacicosanchez This is 'The New Yorker,' not 'The New York Times'.

**Posted 5/24/2012, 4:37:57pm by ArleneHerring**

I believe that a Latino author, osokodiako, has been doing this on and off for over a couple of years:
http://twitter.com/#!/osokodiako Come on NYTimes, give credit to the innovators.

**Posted 5/24/2012, 1:45:30pm by JuanIgnacioSanchez**